

A Know-Nothing Preacher

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor 2:1-5 ESV).

WHO ARE YOU?

Look at you. Do you know who you are? *You* are the glorious sons and daughters of God! You could have chosen any god you wish—there are lots of them available and advertised every day. But you have chosen the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the father of Jesus Christ—and He has chosen you! You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own special treasure, as Peter puts it (1 Pet. 2:9).

And so you gather together this beautiful Sunday morning as you do every Sunday morning. You get up on the first day of every week, put on your shoes, say no to the hundred things clamoring for your attention, and you bravely gather together to go on record as His people, His treasured possession. And together, you declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9).

I’m so honored and thrilled to be among you. I’ve read about you—holy people of God! I know how you marched out of Egypt, armed only with an abiding trust in the God of angel armies, and conquered decades of temptation in the wilderness to enter the Holy Land. I know how even in what seemed like the lowest moments—even when you found yourselves in captivity in a foreign land, God brought you back—redeemed you—and set your feet on solid ground, with a hedge of protection around the sons and daughters He loves as His very own. I know your story. I am standing before the children of Jehovah God—not only to get to know you, but to be one *among* you.

Do you know who you are? You are not who the world thinks you are. You are not even who the church thinks you are. You are what *He* declares you to be: His washed,

sanctified, justified, lovely sons and daughters and heirs of glory because you belong to Jesus Christ.

That’s who you are.

WHO AM I?

But now you are sitting there wondering, “and just who are *you*?” Very few things make a congregation as nervous as changing preachers. And let me assure you—the nerves go both ways! Since we don’t know each other, this may feel like a first date. Do you remember those? The nervousness could reach a fever pitch. So we would try to put our best foot forward. We picked our best clothes, and finally got around to using those Crest White strips that had been sitting in our bathroom drawer for months. We got a fresh haircut (but not too fresh a haircut), practiced our smile, and promised ourselves we would NOT bring up our credit score or list all 4 baby names we’ve already picked out for our future children. Right? The goal was to project the best image of “me.”

But you and I know that if any long-term relationship is going to ensue, we will have to—sooner or later—see the “real deal.” On both sides. And the more honest we can be at the beginning, the better it will be for us in the long run.

When the College Church was between preachers, back in 2005, Neale Pryor gave a lesson filled with immense wisdom.¹ He came across a church bulletin that read this way:

Preacher found to suit everyone’s liking. After searching many fruitless searches, a model preacher has been found, guaranteed to suit any church that desires to call him. He preaches exactly 20 minutes, and then sits down. He will hold the audience in his condemnation of sin, but never hurt anyone’s feelings. He works from 8 AM to 10 PM in every type of work, from preaching to custodian services. He makes \$60 a week, wears good clothes, entertains the brethren often, buys books of all description, has a nice family, drives a good car, and gives \$30 a week to the church. Stands ready to contribute to every good work with which he is confronted.

He is 26 years old and has been preaching for 30 years. He is tall and short, handsome and heavy-set. One brown eye, one blue eye. Hair parted in the middle; left side dark and straight, right side blond and wavy. Has a burning

¹ Neale Pryor, “Our New Preacher,” Sermon preached at the College Church of Christ, Searcy, AR, May 29, 2005.

desire to be with the teenagers and spends all of his time with the old folks. He smiles all the time with a straight face, because he has a good sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work.

I love this story. It reminds me that a new preacher will not be everything everyone expects him to be. How could he possibly? But every minister, like every member, has God-given strengths, and a God-given calling to use those strengths to the glory of God. I know in my marriage I saw some things I liked in Katie the very first time we met. But I have grown to love things about her—the most important things about her—that I didn’t even know were there on our first meeting. There are things about you I can’t wait to discover. Things far beyond what appears in any first impression. And, like any long-term relationship, the end of the story is far richer (and often far different) than the beginning.

My first full-time ministry started at the ripe old age of 19. Believe me when I tell you, there is a special place in heaven for those sweet people who clearly lacked common sense in hiring a 19 year old to preach for them. Now, I say that, but it wasn’t really the will of the congregation that I be given that job.

I was a student half way through my undergraduate degree. I saw an ad for a church an hour away in need of a preacher. So I sent in my resume. Got a call to come preach a try out sermon. A few weeks went by, and they called me down to meet with the elders. I sat there in that room, feeling pretty good about myself. Then they spoke:

“Before we invited you to try out, we misread your resume. We thought we had followed our criteria: only invite people who have graduated, married, and had children. We see now that you have not graduated, you are not married, and—given these two facts perhaps it’s good that you don’t have any children. But we’d like to offer you the job anyway. Will you take it?”

The very first Sunday on the job, I met with the shepherds for our first elders meeting. The preacher always read the minutes from the last meeting, so they suggested I should pick up where the last guy left off. Unfortunately, no one thought to read the minutes before they handed them to me. So, I began to read out loud: “Polled the congregation concerning the next preacher. First choice called; declined. Second choice called; declined. Nathan called...and accepted.” If memory serves, they also so graciously left the polling numbers for me to see. Out of a church of 100, I believe I had 10 votes.

That story ends remarkably well, 4 years later. This church embraced me, loved me, and supported me beyond my wildest dreams. And as God is my witness, I couldn’t tell you who those 10 votes were. I was loved so.

And I know we will be here as well. Katie and I have chosen to put ourselves and our daughter under the care of your loving shepherds, and to be part of this family of believers. To make this our home. I’m told there are close to 700 people who call West Side their home. And it will take a little while for me to get to know you. But it’s only fair to you that I lay my cards down and reveal my heart.

I’m sure you read in your bulletin that my sermon today is titled “A Know Nothing Preacher.” It’s Paul’s own description of himself, taken from his mission statement recorded in 1 Corinthians chapter 2.

PAUL IN CORINTH

At first blush, it looked like Corinth was an ideal place for a speaker with a message. Everyone there would drop what they were doing and huddle around the newest speaker in town with excitement and anticipation as if it were game day at Reynolds Razorback stadium. But there was a catch—at least for Paul. You see, they came to hear a speaker, not to receive a message. They saw power in public speaking. It was a demonstration of great skill. Speakers had great presence, and spoke with eloquence and the wisdom of the age. Speakers were graded on how well they could sway a crowd with verbal manipulation or cunning. So they sought to win over the people by telling them what they wanted to hear. They were salesmen, and their biggest export was themselves.² One of the greatest speakers of that era said “when I came to the great

² See David Gill & Moyer Hubbard, *1&2 Corinthians*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary [Kindle], and Bruce W. Winter, *Philo & Paul Among the Sophists*, SNTSMS (Cambridge: CUP, 1997). When Paul came to Corinth, he was faced with a challenge. Corinth was a Roman colony, full of well-to-do’s. You know them: nobles born in luxury and wealth, highly influential members of the social elite. It was a hub for high-powered philosophers and skilled rhetoricians. One of those used the word “power” to speak of the magic of smooth words and fair speeches (Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 33.3). The “power” of manipulation and persuasion was all the rage. Another word used often was “demonstration”—since speakers were supposed to demonstrate their remarkable ability to sway a crowd (Cicero, *Academica* 2.8; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 5.10.7). A speaker’s “presence” was important, with confidence in his abilities and craftsmanship (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.2.7). They spoke of “eloquence” and “superior wisdom” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.2.7). They spent most of their speech seeking to deliver just the right turn-of-phrase and land the right punchline. It was a performance, centered on dramatic flair. And what did these speakers promote? Well, when a great speaker would enter the city, they tended to follow an expected protocol: they would praise the city for its achievements, praise the people for what they’ve accomplished, show off their education, play to the masses by addressing every hot button issue, using all the insider language, and (through their eloquence and superior wisdom) win over the crowd, leaving them saying “what a speaker.” They boasted of their own status, and the people loved it. For several years before and after Paul’s visit, they made statues of speakers who visited the city and set them up in prominent places (such as Favorinus [AD 80-150] in front of the city library; see Favorinus, *Orations* 37.8; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 4.37).

cities, they begged me to speak to them, they flocked to my doors from the break of dawn, and I didn't have to pay a dime for their praise, because my speech resulted in everyone admiring me.”³

But Paul, called by a crucified and resurrected Lord, armed with the counter-cultural message of the cross, defied all expectation. “When I came to you, brothers,” Paul tells his readers, “I did not come proclaiming to you the mystery of God with eloquent lofty speeches or human wisdom.” In fact, “I came to you in weakness with great fear and much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but in demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” (1 Cor 2:1-5, ESV/NIV).⁴ So what did Paul preach in Corinth? If he didn't give them smooth words and fair speeches, couched in human wisdom—If he instead wanted only to demonstrate the Spirit's power, so that their faith would rest not in homespun wisdom but in the power of God—what did Paul do differently? “For I decided,” writes Paul in verse 2, “to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2, ESV).

This seems to be Paul's mission statement in Corinth and I would like it to be my mission statement here at Westside.

I DETERMINED

First, Paul says “I decided.” Older versions say “I determined.” That really captures it. “I made up my mind.” Another way to say that is “I made the deliberate decision.” A preacher ought to be intentional. You have come to spend an hour in holy reverence to God. And the elders here have asked me to accept more than a job—but a calling. I've been asked to stand in this pulpit, daring to deliver God's words of encouragement, challenge, and saving grace. There are 168 hours in a week, and some of those may be filled with pain, worry, confusion, and even despair. And then you come here and beg

³ Paraphrase. See Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 47:22: “The great cities...escorted with much enthusiasm and éclat, the recipients of my visits being grateful for my presence and begging me to address them and advise them and flocking about my doors from early dawn, all without my having incurred any expense or having made any contribution, with the result that all would admire me.”

⁴ I want you to notice something important. In these 5 verses, Paul goes back and forth describing two things: the *manner* of his preaching and the *content* of his preaching. Paul believed the message given to him by God could best be heard if the *way* he preached matched *what* he preached; so he decided to speak in crucified tones. He had no pizzazz. He used no pizzazz. He claimed no special talent to arouse interest. What he *was* interested in was being a vessel. An empty vessel. To be filled with the spirit of power. And he wishes to glory in nothing—and for his listeners to glory in nothing—but the Spirit of God. So he demonstrated the work of the Holy Spirit and the presence of genuine power, in order that their faith may not be based in human wisdom but rather in God's power (v.4-5).

to know if there is a word of hope, from the creator of the universe that can make sense of life in an often upside-down world. My sermon is 1/5th of 1% of your week. It seems to me that intentionality is called for. This is too important. The need for preaching is too great. Paul was intentional. And what was Paul intentional about?

TO KNOW NOTHING

“I determined” says Paul, “to know nothing.” There were lots of “know somethings” in Corinth. The speakers who wanted to be noticed for their skills, like the Pharisees wanted to be heard for their many loud prayers. They wanted to be seen. To be noticed. Paul said I determined to avoid all of that, and to be a “know nothing” preacher.

Paul isn’t being anti-intellectual. He’s describing how he *operates*. He’s talking about what speakers *do* with book quoting, story telling, and word choices. Paul is against what Savage calls “verbal bullying” or intellectual vanity. He didn’t come to them as a know-it-all. And he wasn’t looking for a pat on the back.⁵

I think the secret to “know nothing” preaching is to regard yourself as a “no-nothing” first. Paul constantly describes himself as someone of no account. But that’s how God works, and who God calls. God said to Moses, “I’m calling you.” Moses said “But I’ve never been eloquent—neither in the past nor since you’ve started speaking to me. I don’t have it” (Ex 4:10, paraphrased). God said to Jeremiah, “I’m calling you.” Jeremiah said “But God, I don’t know how to speak! I’m too young” (Jer 1:6, paraphrased). And when we don’t feel adequate for the calling, we can try too hard to be somebody. It’s easy for us preachers to try to be somebody. To copy the best preachers. “If only I use the right illustration, or quote the right book, or copy McGuiggan’s Irish accent (something I’m tempted to do, if I could)—them maybe I’ll preach a powerful sermon.” As if the power is in the messenger, rather than the message. No. As one commentator put it, “It will be in the faithful preaching of Christ crucified that they will see the true power of the Spirit at work in people’s lives.”⁶ My uncle Mark, over 20 years ago, told me the secret to good preaching is to get out of the way. I think he got that from Paul.

⁵ See David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Paul Gardner (*1 Corinthians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Kindle) says “God does not need someone powerful and clever to achieve his ends with the gospel. He does not need the myriad of anecdotes and jokes that are heard in pulpits around our nation today. He needs people who are servants of Christ and who model humility and frailty as they preach of one who was despised and rejected and who suffered even death on a cross.”

⁶ Gardner.

He's challenging preachers to get rid of self-reliance. “What I’m good at, what I bring to the table, what I offer that few others do.” No. Just give them Jesus, and he’ll do the rest.

EXCEPT JESUS CHRIST

For all these reasons, Paul says that as a minister of the living Word of God, he determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ.

He is the central figure in *every* text. Three New Testament writers—Paul, James, and John—follow three Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) who, in turn, simply quote Jesus himself in summarizing all the law and the prophets in two sentences: “Love God with all you have and love your neighbor as yourself.” But if Jesus is God, and he shows us how to love our neighbor, and how we treat our neighbor *is* how we treat God, then the whole of Scripture can be summarized in two words: *Jesus Christ*—pointing to Him, speaking of Him, or modeling one’s life after him. We can obsess about a lot of things: ourselves, our issues, our success stories, if we are well liked, if our church numbers grow. But Paul had an obsession with Christ. You see it on every page! And if I’m going to preach the gospel, I must be obsessed with him too.⁷

When you hear a sermon from this pulpit, will you know Him better? Will those who have yet to taste of the sweetness that you know in relationship with God through Christ be moved from knowing *about* him to truly knowing *Him*?

I pray to God that you will not leave a service talking about a technique or an illustration, but that you will leave saying “I see God so clearly now; our hearts are burning within us as our love for Jesus grows and grows.”⁸

AND HIM CRUCIFIED

Paul doesn’t just end by centering his preaching on Jesus Christ. He determined to know nothing among the chosen people of God except Jesus Christ *crucified*.⁹ The cross

⁷ Its “visible at every turn,” says Gardner, “and it is something that all who preach the gospel need to emulate.”

⁸ Henry Ward Beecher, “Secret of Christ’s Power,” in *Plymouth Pulpit: Sermons preached in Plymouth Church, Brooklyn* (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1890), p. 354, says one should leave a sermon saying “how near we have been to God! What a view of God we have had!”

⁹ See Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters*. We serve a crucified Savior. Even when we talk about the power in resurrection, we must remember it was a crucified Savior that was resurrected—still bearing the marks in his hands and side. When we talk about the power of God’s Holy Spirit, we have to remember that it was the Spirit of God that led

sets the tone for everything in the Christian’s life. Everything. Paul is not saying “every sermon I preach is on the topic of the cross.”¹⁰ But every sermon he preached *flows from* the cross. Like spokes emanating from the hub of a tire, all Christian teaching emanates from the cross of Christ.

Paul challenges us to see the whole world anew in the light of the cross.¹¹

And so, Lord willing, I too will preach Christ *crucified*. You see, I believe heaven touched *earth* in the person of Jesus Christ. I believe the powers of darkness were lassoed at the cross. I believe Satan and all of his minions laugh at our perceived success stories; they relish when we focus only on our issues.

But the demons *shudder*, and the heaven’s quake, and the angels sing for joy and my Father is glorified when we preach Christ crucified. Because he said if I—when I am lifted up out of the earth—I will draw all people to myself. A church can use all of their time and energy putting together a smooth-running & fine-sounding service. A preacher can offer a packaged gospel that includes 5 steps to a happier marriage, a higher bank account, and a healthier you. (And there’s a time and a place for all of that. We *want* better marriages, and how we handle our money *is* a matter of discipleship. The cross speaks to all of that).

But if Christ *never* came, never died, and never rose, there would *still* be 8 simple ways to be nicer to your wife than you were before.

We are in the demon-shuddering business! Every sermon is a wrestling match with the prince of the powers of the air, and when we preach Christ crucified, God is declared the winner *every* time.

And guess what? Christ said when I am lifted up, *I’ll* draw all people to myself. You know what lasso he throws around you? *Hope*. Something to live for because he’s a God worth dying for.

Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, and into Jerusalem to be crucified. In fact, twice in the New Testament, the Spirit of God is called the Spirit of Jesus, the crucified (Acts 16:7; Phil 1:19). The secret of power in the Bible is “power in weakness”—which is why the crucified Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24).

¹⁰ He denies that in this very book! He talks about all kinds of topics, issues, questions and concerns in his letter to the Corinthians, and no doubt did so when he was among them.

¹¹ Stephen Edward Harris, *God and the Teaching of Theology: Divine Pedagogy in 1 Corinthians 1-4*. As Henry Ward Beecher put it: “[Paul] preached the atonement never as a doctrine; he preached it as a biographical living personality.” See Henry Ward Beecher, “Secret of Christ’s Power,” p. 352.

So, Christ starts his drawing. And we see people dropping like flies left and right. Dropping to their knees in surrender to the King of Glory who suffered it all. We die to ourselves...and...what do you know?

Our marriages get better. “You. No, *you*. You before me...and Christ above all.”

Our generosity grows and our consumption addiction lessens, as we begin to say “Christ fills my every need” (Phil 4:19).

Do you see the point, church? We preach Christ crucified because anything less is a bar far too low. Anything else lacks the power to challenge our inner demons and every idol that takes the place of God in our lives. We preach Christ crucified because anything else robs God of His glory, substituting 30 minutes with Oprah for a title match between the Father of Eternity and the forces that belong to the Father of lies. We preach God taking on human flesh to fix what we broke, to mend what we could never mend. We preach God—in Christ—reconciling the world to himself and, by extension, reconciling our families and our checkbook, our kids soccer schedules and our daily goals.

If you came here today to get to know the new preacher, I hope I’ve shown you my desire to put Christ on display with every word. If you came here today licking your wounds and feeling beat down by the world, I hope you have been reminded of your glorious calling in Christ Jesus, your chosen status, as His very beloved. And what if you came here today in need of a prescription to deal with the sin that is ruining your life? Instead of telling you to be a bit nicer to your wife, or carve out 15 minutes to read your Bible, or add a little religion to an already, well-rounded plate...We’ll challenge you to run to God and give him your all – including every locked door, every room in your heart that—Chick-fil-A—is closed on Sundays.

You want a better home life? You want to be a better wife or husband? Daughter or parent? You want happiness in your life? Real peace and real joy? Catch a glimpse of Christ crucified and let the hope of resurrection take your lackluster weary life and give you back a brand new person with a brand new vision.

The real answer for “10 steps to a better you is 10 steps down this aisle where Jesus waits with open arms begging for you to believe he was crucified for you and begging for you to be crucified with Him. You’ve never seen a better you than a you after God’s gotten through with you. Let the gospel of His Son, by the power of His Spirit, mold you into the man, the woman, the congregation, the people of God we are all called to be.